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Interview with Helen Vice

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Helen Vice

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Recommended Citation

Schoenberger, Judith I. and Vice, Helen, "Interview with Helen Vice" (1994). *College of Education One-Room Schoolhouse Oral Histories*. 173.
<https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ors/173>

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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH HELEN VICE

The country school life as remembered by Helen Hubbard Vice was one of close family and love. She spent her youth moving to several locations, and her life held a variety of travels and educational experiences. Originally from Sanborn, North Dakota, her family sought a milder climate in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Following moves took Helen from a cornfield in Kansas to an apple farm in Arkansas. Her family then returned to Kansas. They continued moving around Kansas until they finally settled on a farm southwest of Greensburg in Kiowa County. In pursuit of an education, Helen attended various schools in diverse locations. While she was a child, she attended schools in Arkansas, Iowa, and Kansas. One of the schools in Kansas, Highland School, later employed her as a teacher. From the beginning at Polly Knob School in Arkansas to the completion of a college degree at Hays, Kansas, Helen was a serious student. This serious student served for years as a teacher and superintendent in Kiowa County, Kansas where she received the early part of her teacher education.

Helen Hubbard began her preparation to become a teacher at the high school in Greensburg, Kansas. To attend Kiowa County High School, Helen had to stay in a room in town while her family lived on the farm. In order for a student to become a teacher, the requirement was to take a normal training course. Upon completion of this course, she passed the difficult required state exam. In 1923, Helen was a member of the first class to graduate from the newly constructed Greensburg High School completed in January of

the same year. She continued to pursue her teaching certificate by taking eight college hours that summer at Hays, Kansas. The trip to Hays to attend class was a major accomplishment for her. The train traveled through Kansas from Hutchinson, McPherson, Salina, and finally to Hays. This was a difficult and lonely summer without family, but, with teaching certificate in hand, Helen returned happily to Kiowa County.

For the 1923-24 school year, Highland School's twenty-three pupils in all eight grades awaited the new teacher. This former pupil of Highland School began teaching there at a salary of \$85.00 a month. The next school year, 1924-1925, she taught at District #45, also known as Warner School, or Ahrens School, making a monthly salary of \$100.00. Helen taught in four different Kiowa County country schools with one interruption in 1925-1926. While staying with an aunt, she attended North Dakota State at Fargo, North Dakota. She took sixty hours there and received her life teaching certificate. Returning to Kiowa County between the years of 1926 and 1930, she taught at four of the country schools in the county: District #17, Hopkins School, District #52, Greenridge School and District #45. Each district paid her a salary of \$100.00 monthly.

The day began early for the teacher in the one room country school. The school year began September 1. Finding lodging was difficult and Helen was grateful to have a place for room and board even at a cost of \$20.00 per month. Because she was so appreciative of the family that housed her, Helen gave much respect to these

people. One way that she showed this appreciation was by respectfully attending church with the family. The community expected a teacher to have a certain image which Helen described as to "behave herself." While staying with a family that lived seven and one-half miles north of school, Helen rode her horse to get to school in time to start the fire in the big potbellied stove. She learned by hard experience that it was better to ride a horse than to take a buggy. After Helen experienced several times of walking home because a rattler or rabbit had spooked the horse and upset the buggy, she decided that riding a horse was best. One day while still taking the buggy, some appealing wild flowers and "love grass" beckoned her to stop and pick a bouquet for the schoolhouse. The horse did not share her appreciation for pretty flowers because a rabbit jumped up and spooked the horse. This in turn upset the buggy, and the horse took off for home leaving Helen to walk. So, thereafter Helen rode her much loved, dependable old horse, Crescent, to and from school. All of the four schools had a barn for the teacher to secure her horse in.

Once at school, with the horse secured in the barn, Helen's first task was to start the fire in the big stove. During the winter, riding or walking to school was very cold. The teacher got cold riding horseback and the students got cold walking. The students had the added burden of carrying "that darn dinner bucket" that caused their hand to get cold, too. This made the warm fire in the stove a necessary and welcome part of the country school. The teacher started the fire early enough so that the school house was

warm when she summoned the children with the school bell at 9 o'clock. In order to start the fire, Helen had to get cobs, kindling, and coal from the coal shed. It took some time before the fire in the stove warmed the schoolhouse, but the warmth felt good standing by the stove. Water was available from a pump or carried to the schoolhouse. Some children came early to help carry the coal or water. As a teacher, Miss Hubbard let the children who wanted to help do so, but she never required them to carry the coal, water, or do other janitorial jobs. After all, these duties were "the teacher's job!"

The community built the schoolhouse and outdoor toilets on one acre of land donated by the land owner. They distributed the land so schools were no farther than six miles apart. None of the children had a far distance to walk to school. Most children walked about two miles to the schoolhouse. Once a year before the school year started, people of the community performed all the necessary maintenance to the school building. Women cleaned the schoolhouse and washed windows while the men mowed the tall grass that grew over the summer.

After arriving at school, the children gathered inside the school building with windows lovingly covered by curtains that were hand-made by the teacher. The windows were all on the north except for one west window. This familiar interior surrounded the students as they gathered with their school books, which their families bought at the drug store in Greensburg, Big Chief tablets, and penny pencils. The students' clothes were not fancy but always clean,

neat, and mended. Other familiar sights inside the school were the potbellied stove, a large world map, a United States flag, and pictures of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln on the walls. Helen's school always had fresh flowers! Potted geraniums or other hardy, colorful flowers made a cheerful presence. Sometimes they froze over the weekend, but she quickly replaced them.

The day began with "Opening Exercises." The students always sang one or more songs from 101 Best Songs songbook to start the day. The children then recited the flag salute and the morning prayer:

MORNING PRAYER

Father we thank you for the night
And for the pleasant morning light
For rest and food, and loving care
And all that makes the world so fair.

The leader for the day chose the Lord's Prayer or other appropriate activity as part of the morning exercises.

After the opening, eager students waited for their turn to recite while sitting at the recitation bench near the blackboard and bulletin board. Recitation began with first grade, followed with the second grade, and so on. During the ten to fifteen minute recitation, Helen demonstrated problems on the blackboard giving a quiet, careful explanation. As each grade finished recitation, they returned to their seats to do the work assigned by Miss Hubbard. All students worked quietly at their seats while the other classes recited.

Pride in handwriting was apparent as all children first through eighth grade practiced penmanship together. First graders wrote in cursive just as the older grades. Sometimes children chose up sides for fun competitions that paired children at the blackboard to see who wrote to 10 the fastest. Another educational game was a map race in which someone would name a town and the two at the map raced to find it first. These activities replaced other activities such as the formal spelling bee. The enrollment was usually too small at the rural schools to have spelling bees; therefore, only county and town schools had them.

Mid-morning brought a break in the competitions or recitation, and the children had a fifteen minute recess. At recess the children played various games all together on the spacious land that surrounded the schoolhouse. All the children and Helen played together just like a family. Helen considered classroom and playground discipline at the country school just like a family, and she assumed a motherly role. If there was a problem, Helen talked to the pupil as a mother correcting her children. They sometimes played ball with a ball that Helen made from an unraveled sock, or they chose to play on the merry-go-round. Other games included Blackman, Annie Over, Fiddle Sticks, Drop the Handkerchief, Three Deep and the Flying Dutchman. Helen explained one of these games, Three Deep. To play, two people stood one in front of the other. The one who was "it" tried to go around the circle to get in front. The one in the back tried to get into "its" place in the circle and leave

him out. After recess, Miss Hubbard gathered the children in for the remainder of the morning.

At noon, the children ate their lunches that they brought from home. Before eating lunch the children had to wash. Sometimes they shared a dipper for water and a drink. At Ahrens School, each child had their own towel and cup that they brought from home or the teacher gave them. To avoid unmannerly behavior such as manipulating food from the younger children or eating outdoors or in the barn, Helen taught manners and dignity at mealtime. The children sat quietly at their own desk covered with an oilcloth that she sewed by hand. This kept the desks cleaner and promoted a calm lunch atmosphere. When everyone had eaten, the children then went outside to play.

The afternoon progressed in the same manner as the morning with class recitations, a recess break, and dismissal at 4 o'clock. The children took their own school books home each day as there were no reference books or library books available at the school. With books, supplies, and coats ready, the children sat quietly at their desks and waited for the daily closing prayer:

EVENING PRAYER

Now the day is over,
All our tasks are by
Soon the stars will twinkle
In the evening sky,
Little hands are folded
That have worked all day,
Little lips are silent
Books are put away.
Soon we'll say our goodnight,
Each had done his best,
Homeward now we're going
For a quiet rest.

One cold day right around dismissal time in the winter of 1927-1928, a bad storm developed. Helen realized a blizzard was eminent and knew the children could not get home. Most of the children had walked to school that morning, but one girl and Helen had their horses at school. The teacher decided it best to make preparations to spend the night at the schoolhouse. Ready with buckets for toilets, extra coal, coats, and blankets for warmth, they prepared for their overnight stay. When supper time came and the children were still not home, the parents prepared wagons to rescue those stranded at the schoolhouse. The many parents who had also watched the storm with concern, surprised Helen and the children when they arrived to take the children safely

home. The Warner family, who had three children in school, took a thankful and grateful Helen home with them in their wagon.

On a typical day when the children had all gone home, Helen had to grade papers, get lessons ready for the next day, clean the schoolhouse and secure the stove and schoolhouse for the night. She also often took home papers to grade and other school work. Helen had to review for the next day's lesson, and she sometimes prepared a special art project for the children.

One special event characteristic of Miss Hubbard's country school included the Christmas program. They always had a Christmas program complete with a lovely Christmas tree and a jovial Santa Claus. The students always received treats from the teacher. The children presented a program reciting "dialogs" from some of Helen's books. The teacher planned, rehearsed, and made all the costumes for the programs. One year, two girls sang "Star of the East" in white dresses hand-made by their teacher, Helen. Sheets served as curtains for the children's programs. During the school day the children and Miss Hubbard depended upon sunlight for lighting because the schoolhouse had no lights. If it got dark outside, it was dark in the schoolhouse. For the evening programs, people brought lamps to light the inside of the schoolhouse.

At the end of the school year in April, the country school children participated in their other special event. It was a picnic or box supper and program held to celebrate the end of the school year and to help raise money for the school. This event was especially significant for the school because the entire community

participated. The children were busy preparing their program, and the mothers were busy preparing the food for their children's boxes. Helen used the money from this event to buy books. One year they were very successful and made \$60.00. This picnic marked the end of the school year for Helen's country school.

Having the same students at the country school from year to year was common and created a family atmosphere that required little discipline. Miss Hubbard disciplined the students at the country school just like a family. Helen regarded herself as a mother of a big family. She talked to a pupil whenever there was a problem. There was never a major discipline problem. However, an exception came one year the day before the year-end box supper and program. The incident involved an "ornery rascal" named Edward Christopher who moved from Pratt to Kiowa County. At the end of the lunch break, the students went into the schoolhouse. When they gathered in their seats inside, Miss Hubbard noticed that some of the boys remained outside. Unsure of the best procedure, the teacher ignored this and started the afternoon lessons. From the window she saw four sixth and seventh grade boys still outside running and playing in a nearby field. She also observed them sitting on the straw stack in the field. Before long, the teacher went to the boys and told them to come inside and stay after school. As a country school teacher, Helen never had a paddle, so when school dismissed, she went to a windbreak across the road to gather some sticks to use. The leader of this problem, Edward Christopher, along with Harvey Miller, Sid Matson, and a boy named Marvin received two

swats with the sticks. Poor Marvin, a big lanky seventh grade boy as tall as the teacher, was "white as a sheet!" Later, a father of one boy told Helen he suspected they had planned something ornery. He explained his wish for the boys, if caught, was that the teacher would "beat the tar out of them." Although the punishment was not quite this severe, Helen did handle the situation in the same way as the father would have.

The end of the school year marked another big event. This was state graduation exams. Seventh grade students took an end-of-the-year exam in only two subjects. The eighth grade students studied hard to prepare for the required state graduation exam over all subjects such as music, penmanship, reading, math and geography. The students took the exam at one of the town schools or a county school. Each student had to score no lower than 60 on any test and have an overall average of at least 70 which was a C. Those who passed the exam graduated at a county graduation ceremony held at one of the churches in town.

The rural schools had some new advancements in the school year of 1929-1930. The most appreciated of these was the telephone. It made it much easier because Helen could call for help in case of an emergency. Although she never had any bad catastrophes with students at the country school, it was reassuring to know that help would be easy to reach if needed. Another advancement at the country school was the record player. Miss Hubbard brought a Victrola record player to school. The students did exercises to the records occasionally. Helen also relied on her own

inventiveness as a teacher. To make patterns for the children to color, Helen fashioned a duplicating machine with a special pan, jelly substance and etching pen. The students enjoyed coloring the pictures made with this crude duplicator. These new advancements enhanced education in the country school.

The school year 1930-1931 brought more changes for Helen. During this year she taught a combined third and fourth grade class at District #1, Greensburg North School. At Christmas-time this school year, Helen married Cecil Vice. Escaping the usual mandatory resignation of a married teacher, she taught for the remainder of the school year at North School. At the end of this school year, Helen resigned from teaching and dedicated her time to her husband while living on the "Einsel Ranch." Her teaching career paused temporarily as she raised a family. When Cecil became ill with cancer in 1950, they moved to Greensburg. His death in 1952 left Helen alone with two daughters.

When Helen went to the court house to pay taxes for that year, Sonora Garner was county superintendent at the time; and, she asked Helen to teach again. At age forty-eight, Helen thought she was way too old to teach. The school board persuaded her to take the job teaching at the new Greensburg Grade School starting in the fall of 1953. She taught there until 1959.

Another new turn came regarding Helen's role involving education in Kiowa County when she ran for county superintendent in 1959. She won without actively campaigning. Earning a yearly salary of \$2900.00, she served as county superintendent from 1959

to 1969. The county schools included Greensburg, Mullinville, Belvidere, Wellsford, Haviland and the Haviland Academy. At that time, the rural schools had closed and the former schoolhouse land returned to the original owners. As superintendent, Helen visited all the county schools, observed the teachers, ate in the lunchrooms, and filed statistical reports with the state. Showing further dedication to improvement in the educational system of Kiowa County, Helen met with other area county superintendents annually. At this annual meeting before the beginning of each school year, they discussed new developments in education, listened to speakers, and looked at the latest in books and textbooks. They also distributed supplies to give the teachers.

As superintendent, Helen held a local meeting before school started. She met with the teachers in Kiowa County to support them as the year began. At this meeting, she distributed supplies including grade cards, new books, pencils, and chalk to the county school teachers. Helen encouraged the teachers to do well and remained concerned about the education of the students in Kiowa County. Helen Vice's dedication to education was always visible as she taught in her country schools and later served as superintendent of the county district.